



Transcript for a Reading from
Letters from Alabama (U.S.): Chiefly Relating to Natural History
An Audio Program from *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*

Aaron Trehub of Auburn University Libraries reads an excerpt from Philip Henry Gosse's classic *Letters from Alabama (U. S.): Chiefly Relating to Natural History*. This transcript has been edited for readability.

Mr. Trehub: Welcome to *This Goodly Land's* series of readings from classic Alabama literature.

I'm Aaron Trehub, Assistant Dean for Library Technology, Auburn University Libraries. I'm reading an excerpt from the Alabama classic *Letters from Alabama (U. S.): Chiefly Relating to Natural History* by Philip Henry Gosse.

...

Letter Ten.

August 1st

There is a plant now abundantly in blossom, which grows in neglected fields and such-like places, in company with the *Zinnia*, covering, like it, large patches of ground with a dense mass of vegetation, two or three feet high. It is *Cassia occidentalis*. It has pinnate leaves, with many narrow leaflets; a bright yellow flower, succeeded by a pod like that of a sweet pea, which contains seeds hard and unpleasant to the taste. From its local name, Florida Coffee, I infer that these seeds are roasted, as an imitation of the Mocha berry, but such a use seems unknown here.

The caterpillar of the Cloudless Sulfur Butterfly (*Colias Eubule*) is said to feed on this plant. I may remark that this gay butterfly, which was among the first that I noticed, still continues plentiful. Another kindred species, but a very little one (*Xanthidia Tucunda*), the Black-banded Sulfur, which was common in May and June, is become scarce, though it has not yet disappeared. I will describe it.

It is an inch and three-eighths in extent, sulfur-yellow, with a black cloud at the tip of the first pair [of wings], and some black irregular spots running into each other, at the margin of the second. But its distinguishing character is a broad band of black, running along the inner margin of the fore wings. Beneath, the first pair are yellow, with a dusky tip; the second greyish, with innumerable specks. Another species, of as nearly as possible the same size, has but recently

appeared, but is become quite common; the Black-edged Sulfur (*Xanthidia Delia*). It is marked very much as the preceding, save that the band at the inner margin of the first wings is altogether wanting. Beneath, both pairs are yellow, with pink fringes; numerous specks, and a few larger black dots, are scattered over the surface.

The Rattlesnake (*Crotalus*) is quite common, but, though well known to be poisonous, is not much dreaded. The retreat of this reptile is usually a hollow tree, which has an entrance near the ground: when pursued, he makes for his hole and ensconces himself within; but his pursuer, if he be a chance passenger, and have not time or means to get him out, just blocks up the hole, by driving in a stout stick, or a stone, marks the tree, and calls at the nearest house to give the information.

This is quite a conventional practice; such a notice was left at our door the other day, and I accompanied a young man to the place pointed out. He collected a good heap of dry bush and leaves around the hole, and then taking out the plug, set fire to the mass, in order to smoke out the tenant; but we watched in vain: either our customer was sulky, and chose to die, like Sardanapalus, in his palace, or else he had previously made his exit by crawling up the inside of the trunk, and out at the top.

That snakes have the power of crawling up perpendicular surfaces, I had lately a very curious proof. I was engaged one afternoon quietly reading, in a room which was only clap-boarded, without being ceiled within, when, turning my head, I saw just above me a snake mounting the wall, about eight feet from the ground. I was a little alarmed, and gave a start which frightened my visitor, and he fell and escaped: I regret that in my surprise I did not notice the species. The only assistance afforded him in the ascent, was from the projecting edges of the clap-boards, about half an inch wide, that overlapped each other.

To return to the Rattlesnake. The hollow horny appendages to the tail, which are commonly called the rattles, are said to be cast annually with the sloughed skin; and it is inferred that, "consequently, no inference as to the age of the animal, can be drawn from the number of pieces which compose the rattles." I confess this appears to me to be a *non sequitur*, for is it not quite possible that one may be added to the number annually, without involving the actual perpetuity of the preceding ones?

I cannot decide the fact. A young one that I killed in the garden (probably *Crotalus durissus*), had but three rattles: now as these appendages are often found much more numerous, it is evident that the increase must take place at some time or other, and it seems to me more likely to occur at the sloughing of the skin, that is, annually, than either oftener or seldomer. I may remark of the specimen which I killed, that its color was purplish brown, marked with a red-brown streak down the back, and somewhat irregular bands of black; the tail was black, and an inch and a half in length, exclusive of the rattles: the total length was about twenty inches.

A Lizard of a bluish color puzzled me not a little, owing to its tail not being more than an inch in length: I should have supposed that it had been broken off, an accident to which these reptiles are very liable, but that, short as it was, it tapered to a point. The creature was crawling about the logs of the house, and was very wary, so that I could not examine it; it was much like the kind

vulgarly called Scorpion (*Agama undulata*), but seemed somewhat thicker.

An observation, however, of Dr. Harlan's, in the *Journal of the Academy of Natural Sciences*, threw light on the matter: it was to the effect that the Skinks, a family of lizards, have the power of reproducing the tail, when it has been accidentally broken off, and that the new tail is of a blue color. The tail of the one under notice was undoubtedly in the process of reproduction, and perhaps the wariness of the animal might have been induced by the experience of injury, and consequent suffering. (Since this observation was recorded, I have had many opportunities of noticing phenomena analogous to the above: the power of renewing the tail is common to most, if not all, Saurian Reptiles.)

The chief enemies of the lizard tribes are the smaller and more ignoble birds of prey. Owls catch them in their evening wanderings, for I have found the stomach of an owl crammed full of the bones of small lizards. But I rather think that our lizards are almost exclusively diurnal in their habits, and therefore must be exposed to the predatory assaults of the weaker Hawks.

The Swallow-tailed Kite (*Elanus furcatus*) is one of these, a bird of more than ordinary elegance, which has recently appeared with us, and may now be seen nearly every day associating in little groups. Their habit is to sail round and round on the wing in wide circles, sometimes at an immense elevation over the lofty woods; at other times they swoop down towards the bushes and herbage of the fields, and sweep to and fro among the trees; doubtless in pursuit of prey, for an attentive eye may now and then observe them raise one foot to the beak with a rapid movement, and deliver something to the mouth.

The appearance of these birds in the air is very beautiful. The fine contrast of the colors, pure white on the head, neck, and whole lower parts, and deep glossy black on the back, wings, and tail; the size of the bird, a full-grown male measuring two feet in length, and nearly five feet in spread of the expanded wings; and the remarkable elegance of its figure, produced by its slenderness, its small head, and the great length of its pointed wings and tail, in which it exceeds the swallow— all combine to attract admiration. The grace of its motions, too, in the air, is admirable; it continues to sail about for hours without resting, apparently without effort, now coursing around our heads, now chasing its fellows in amicable play, and presently mounting in spiral circles to the loftier regions of the air, as if it had forsaken this sordid world, and would wing its way to some distant sphere.

The children, who are familiar with this charming bird, say that several of them build every year in a gloomy pine swamp not far off. I know the place, a somber dismal tract, bordering on both sides a sluggish stream that falls into the Alabama, where tall rugged pine trees rear their lofty heads, and spread their sable foliage, and toss about their gnarled arms, festooned with those pendant rags of Spanish moss that chill the spirit, and seem the very essence of desolation. On one of the tallest of these old pines, at the very summit of the tree, there is a great bundle of sticks and moss, which the lads tell me is a kite's nest of the present season, though now deserted, and already the worse for summer storms.

I have just obtained a specimen of a bird nearly related to this, and which might, indeed, be supposed by a stranger to be the same species in imperfect plumage. The colors and their

distribution are much the same as in the preceding, but they are less pure, both the white and the black inclining to grey. Its size too is smaller, and the tail is but slightly forked. This is the Mississippi Kite (*Ictinia Mississippiensis*); a much less common bird, but of nearly the same habits and manners. My specimen was brought down by the unerring rifle of a friend the other day, while pursuing the same graceful evolutions in flight that I have mentioned as characteristic of its more elegant cousin.

The food of both species is described to me as consisting mainly of the larger insects and the smaller reptiles; the cicada that sit on the trees and fill the air with their deafening “crink”; the large dragon-flies that hawk to and fro over the fields and pools; the locusts and katydids that jump about the herbage and shrubs; the savage brown wasps that build huge nests of grey paper on old trees and posts, and many species of beetles, form the insect-diet; while nimble lizards, small slender snakes, and frogs, afford a frequent and agreeable variety. The contents of the stomach in my Mississippi Kite confirmed, in part, at least, this report; for it was stuffed with a couple of cicadas, and a large dragon-fly, mercilessly crumpled up, to be sure, but otherwise little damaged.

In one of my former letters I alluded to the assaults of tiny, but bloodthirsty, and far from despicable, enemies, the Ticks. The young ones of the present season are just now exceedingly numerous; they congregate in great masses on the tips of leaves, and at the extremities of the stalks and blades of grass that grow beside the roads, or overhang the paths of the woods, waiting for an opportunity of selecting some more exalted animal to become their prey. On the slightest touch of any extraneous body they adhere to it, so that in walking through the woods we become almost covered with them. The utmost care is required to avoid touching the herbage; and if we sit down on a prostrate log in the forest, though only for a moment, myriads are presently crawling over our clothes.

They are very minute, from the size of a small pin's head to that of a grain of sand, so that they can scarcely be brushed off when once attached. They soon insinuate themselves beneath the clothes, and seeking out some protected part of the body, especially where there is any hollow or angle, they thrust into the flesh a horny tubular proboscis, the extremity of which is armed with reflected barbs, and suck the blood of their victim at leisure. The sensation produced by the assaults of these minute ones is rather one of itching than of pain; they are too well moored to be removed by any rubbing, and too well shielded to be hurt by it; hence they riot in impunity, till, on disrobing at night, the usual search reveals some half-score of ruthless rogues battered on gore, and swollen to ten times their legitimate bulk. Even then it is no easy matter to dislodge them; for the barbs at the tip of the rostrum resist and hold fast in the flesh when the insect is pulled, nor do they yield without considerable force, and some laceration.

I was surprised at the instant readiness with which these little parasites leave their watching-stations on the herbage, and cleave to passing animals. But, last evening, I had an opportunity of seeing how this is managed. I noticed a full-grown Tick on the extremity of a leaf, to which it held on with its hindmost pair of feet, while all the six other limbs were held out in the air, and kept waving to and fro. On my bringing the tip of my finger to it, it adhered instantly with these free feet, letting go the leaf at the same moment; and I infer that this is the approved method of proceeding with both young and old.

It is pitiable to see the poor brutes, the dogs and horses and cattle. Unable to free themselves from their insect pests, which appear instinctively to know where they may bleed their victims in security, the poor patient creatures are obliged to endure them. Around the eyes, within and behind the ears, at the angles of the limbs, and at the base of the tail, we see the vile Ticks crowded, of all sizes, according to their various degrees of bloatedness; some dropping off in succession, when unable to carry more, and making room for empty and thirsty expectants. The poor animals well appreciate the relief which is occasionally rendered them by their human friends, and will stand patiently and quietly, while the disgusting vermin are plucked off, one by one.

A day or two ago, I picked up in the high road a large Tick, that had no doubt dropped spontaneously from some beast, when sated with blood. Its natural size would have been about that of this letter "O", and scarcely thicker than paper; but it now appeared of the dimensions of a large horse-bean, both in diameter and thickness, tensely swollen, and as if ready to burst. Its body was a mere bag, filled with black clotted blood: no motion was perceptible in it, yet it was probably still alive.

It is commonly stated here, and I think it is probably correct, that these Ticks live three years. The first season they are called Seed-ticks—the minute ones mentioned above; the next year they become Yearling-ticks; and the third, Old-ticks. They are among the most disagreeable pests of the country; I dislike them even more than the Mosquitoes; though their season, to be sure, is much more brief.

I have heard that in India the residents distinguish two kinds of tiger-hunting, one of which is less agreeable than the other; viz. that in which you hunt the tiger, and that in which the tiger hunts you. And so it seems that this style of doing business, in which a rascally Tick lays wait for, and catches me, is to be put down as a non-agreeable variation of insect-hunting.

But I will now talk of superior game, and give some traits of the prowess of "a foeman worthy of our steel." One of our neighbors has been kept in a state of feverish vexation lately by the frequent depredations made in his corn-field by a Bear. Bruin is as fond of roasting-ears as the squirrels, or as the planter himself, and as his great splay feet trample down much more than he eats, the mischief which he does is commensurate. A night or two ago, one of the Negro boys came running to the house, stammering and spluttering— "O, Master, Master! Big bear in corn-patch; I see 'un get over."

All was bustle in an instant; bullets were cast—a job that has always to be done at the moment they are wanted—and our friend Jenkins and his overseer crept out with their rifles to the field, under the guidance of Washington, the black boy. There was sufficient evidence of the truth of the report; the marks of broad paws were deep in the soft earth; the spot where the huge monster had climbed the rails was plainly shown, while the trodden-down rows of ripening corn gave proof of the diligence with which he had labored at his ruinous work. But somehow or other he had smelt a rat; perhaps the lad had involuntarily uttered the usual interjection of astonishment, "Heigh!" or in his hurry to carry tidings, had given an alarm; however, the beast had made good a premature retreat, and the planter and his servants had only to follow the same course,

meditating schemes of revenge.

The manner in which they hope to outwit him is curious. Bruin is a sober, sedate, methodical old gentleman; he has a determined *modus operandi* for everything, from which he will not deviate. Among other of his stereotypical habits is that of getting into a field, night after night, in the same manner, and at the same place; climbing over the very identical spot of the fence at which he mounted on the first occasion of his trying the corn. The scratches produced by his claws, and the smears from his soiled feet, make this spot sufficiently obvious.

Just at this place, then, the overseer has fixed up a loaded rifle, making it point upwards at such an angle that the muzzle may face the animal's breast as he mounts the rails. A stick is attached to the trigger, and this is made fast, at right angles, to a transverse stick, which rests on two forks about breast high, a few inches from the fence, on the outside. In rising on his hind feet to put his fore paws on the rails, the Bear will press with his breast against the transverse stick, which, driving back the trigger, will discharge the contents of the rifle full into his heart. I have not yet heard of the result in this particular case, but it is an approved method of proceeding, and sanguine expectations are entertained of success.

The predilections of Bruin are not confined to corn. He is an epicure and a gourmand, and especially relishes well-fed pork. The hogs that run freely in the woods are too sharp for him, but the home-fed porkers that are confined in the yard have no means of escape, and the farmer has occasionally to lament the loss of a fat hog on which he had been looking with complacent approval, and pleasing anticipations of the pickle tub. Our shaggy friend, however, has felt a similar approval, and indulged similar anticipations; and some moonshiny night has issued from his lonely den at the roots of some ancient sycamore in the neighboring swamp, and climbing the pig-fence, has taken the squealing pig in his arms, and borne him away in his paternal hug.

It is very seldom that a bear is met with in the woods, for his activity is chiefly nocturnal; but a highly curious encounter is said to have taken place one day in a part of the forest not very remote from this place, which I will give you, as illustrative of the manners, both human and ursine, of these parts.

A planter had ridden out into the wood to look after some strayed cattle, carrying with him the redoubtable cow-whip, consisting of a handle three feet long, and of a lash of twisted rawhide thirty feet long, which was coiled on his right arm. Suddenly a huge bear starts up before him, from behind the gnarled roots of an old tree. The man could not resist the impulse to give the animal a lash with his whip, but, to his surprise, the bear showed a disposition to fight. It was rather an awkward predicament, but the horse was intelligent and agile, and as the rider made him face the bear, he was able, by leaping nimbly to and fro, to evade the ferocious brute, stung to madness by the repeated blows of the terrific cow-whip.

At length the bear acknowledged his master, and turned tail for flight; when a thought struck the planter that he might possibly drive him home, as he would a refractory bullock. He accordingly kept close behind the animal, driving him along one of the numerous cattle-paths that thread the forests, admonishing him, by a severe cut with the whip, whenever he attempted to leave the track, until at length the poor creature patiently went as he was driven. A distance of six miles

was thus traversed by pursuer and pursued, till the planter came within hail of his own house, when his son came out with a rifle and shot the poor persecuted bear.

This story may seem apocryphal, but it is so entirely in consonance with the habits of the people, that I see no reason for disbelieving it, though I have only hearsay-evidence for its truth. Such an attempt, under the circumstances, is quite likely to have been made by a southern planter; and when devised, the nature of the cow-whip, and the power and skill with which it is wielded in compelling semi-wild cattle to obedience, present means adequate to the emergency.

As I sit in the cool of the evening, at the backdoor of the house where I am residing, I have an opportunity of witnessing those singular evolutions of the Chimney Swallows (*Hirundo pelagica*), which are the prelude to their nightly repose. There is a tall chimney rising from the smithy a few rods distant, round the summit of which some hundreds of swallows assemble every evening, about sunset. They come one by one from all parts, trooping to the common lodging at the same hour; and as soon as each arrives, he begins to wheel round and round in the air above the chimney-top.

In a few minutes a large number are collected, which sweep round in a great circle, twittering and chirping; others continuing to arrive every moment, which immediately take their part in the circumvolution. By and by, one and another and another, drop, as it were, into the chimney, as the circle passes over it, until they pour down in a stream, with a roaring sound, which, when heard from within the building, sounds like the sullen boom of a distant cataract. At length, when objects begin to be dim and indiscernible, all have entered and taken up their places within the shaft, where they remain for the night. In the morning, near sunrise, they emerge in a dense stream, pouring out like bees, make a few wide evolutions, and disperse on their daily occupation.

...

We've been listening to a reading from *Letters from Alabama* by Philip Henry Gosse.

This audio program is produced for *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*, a Web site connecting Alabama and its writers. You can find additional resources on this topic when you visit us at www.alabamaliterarymap.org.

This Goodly Land is a program of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities, in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University, and the Alabama Center for the Book.

The reader is Aaron Trehub, Assistant Dean for Library Technology, Auburn University Libraries. This program is produced and edited by Midge Coates. Technical assistance is provided by Darrell Crutchley and Sam Singer.

This audio program is funded in part by the Alabama "Support the Arts" License Tag Fund and by Auburn University Outreach.

Thank you for listening.